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ABSTRACT

A long standing history of poverty and isolation continues in American Indian communities throughout South Dakota. Dakota Wesleyan University's native American students thus enter college with difficult family situations, substantial personal alienation, negative self-images and self-expectations, and a lack of career direction. Dakota Wesleyan is in a unique position to provide much needed educational services to the American Indians in the state. The institute has committed funds for an American Indian studies program, and provides both liberal arts and career preparation. Dakota Wesleyan offers two courses to meet general education oral communication requirements: fundamentals of speech communication and interpersonal communication. Most Indian students avoid such courses because the public speaking emphasis is alien to the Indian culture. These courses have begun to take into account such cultural differences as the belief that it is disrespectful to speak out in public and a sense of organization that does not always follow the thesis/support format. The experiences of native American students in these courses suggest that instructors must consider cultural differences and be sensitive to the special needs of these students. (HTH)

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THE NATIVE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AT DAKOTA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Mike Turchen

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THE NATIVE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE AT DAKOTA WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Mike Turchen, Dakota Wesleyan University

American Indians in South Dakota

A long standing history of poverty and isolation continues in American Indian communities throughout South Dakota. Economic uncertainty affecting the entire nation strikes particularly hard on South Dakota's Indian reservations. While the nation struggles with 7-8% unemployment, South Dakota reservations average nearly 85% unemployment. Over 55% of the state's Indian families have incomes below the federal poverty level. Such a difficult economic reality produces a number of related problems such as family stress, alcohol abuse, and community breakdown. In addition, low educational levels on the reservations result in an unskilled labor force that is very sensitive to worsening economic conditions. Dakota Wesleyan's Indian students thus enter college with increasingly difficult family situations, substantial personal alienation, negative self-images and self-expectations, and a lack of career direction. The effects of these factors must be reversed in order for the students to succeed.

Profile of American Indian Students at Dakota Wesleyan

American Indian students attending Dakota Wesleyan exhibit characteristics which reflect this general background.

Income: The average parental or personal income is approximately $10,600 with a range of $0-17,500. This is particularly significant in that the average family size of 6 is quite large. Most of the students' parents are unemployed or underemployed and provide few role models of successful career development.

Family Situation: Only 17% of the American Indian students fit the traditional college student model-single with no dependents and living, married parents. 26% of the students are married with children. 20% are single parents. 60% of the single students' parents are divored or deceased. The result is a frequent absence of strong parental support toward achievement in higher education.

Academic Preparation: Reflecting high dropout rates in South Dakota Indian high schools, 20% of the Indian students reach college by obtaining GED certification. The average ACT score is 12 which compares to a national figure of 18 for entering freshmen. A study of Bureau of Indian Affairs schools on one reservation showed that only 13.5% of the students ranked over the 50th percentile on achievement tests while the majority scored under the 11th percentile.

Such ineffectiveness leads to early exit from the education system. Statistics from the South Dakota Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reveal continuing high dropout figures among reservation high schools.

High School	Indian Enrollment	# Dropout in 1981-82	Percent
Crow Creek	145	87	60
Flandreau	427	120	28
Little Wound	202	89	44
Lower Brule	71	18	25
Marty Indian School	124	45	36
Wagner	29	9	69
White River	56	18	32
Winner	13	9	69
Yankton	14	9	64

Although these figures represent only one year, it is clear that a small number of Indian students are graduating and an even smaller number are going on to college. Of those that do, the majority in our service area are coming with poor academic preparation and skill levels. While the average ACT score for entering freshman at Dakota Wesleyan is approximately 18.5, the American Indian student scores are approximately 12. Most often this results from poor preparation rather than lack of potential.

Career Development Needs of American Indian Students at Dakota Wesleyan

South Dakota reservations need tribal members to fill the professional and managerial positions usually held by non-Indians. Reservation institutions such as schools, health facilities, and government agencies experience a very high turnover among non-Indian employees. For example, in reservation schools the turnover rate averages over 50% among teachers and supervisory personnel. Tribal members with roots in the community are much more likely to stay on the reservation and are more likely to understand community desires and needs.

American Indian students, however, frequently are not aware of the actual professional and managerial needs of reservation communities. Career counseling is necessary to inform students of reservation needs and assist them in attaining career goals in light of these needs. In this way Dakota Wesleyan University can better serve reservation communities and the youth that they send to our institution.

American Indian Programs at Dakota Wesleyan University

During the early 1970's, the Board of Trustees of Dakota Wesleyan University stated its commitment to serving the higher

educational needs of American Indian communities. Ten years ago, the institution committed funds for an American Indian Studies program which offers the only major in the field in South Dakota and one of only a handful in the nation. The courses offered provide skills and knowledge in the areas of American Indian history, culture, law, education, and Lakota language. The courses have been incorporated into the general education requirements, and significant numbers of both Indian and non-Indian students participate. An American Indian Cultural Center has existed for several years as a focal point for the campus community. Over $21,000 in institutional scholarships is designated specifically for American Indian students. The University also awards $5,000 annually to American Indian alumni to carry out reservation community development projects. All of these efforts have become increasingly important as the State Higher Education system has made major cutbacks in its programs for American Indian students.

Dakota Wesleyan is in a unique position to provide much-needed educational services to the American Indians in South Dakota. It is one of the few four-year colleges geographically near the reservations which is an advantage for American Indian students who typically want proximity. It is a small college of about 600 students located in a small city of about 15,000, and thus possesses two characteristics often cited by American Indian students as important in easing their transition into college life. It provides both liberal arts and career preparation, offering programs in business, education, human services, nursing, and the preprofessions, as well as a number of other programs of potential interest to American Indians. It is oriented to serving students from South

Dakota, with about 80% of its students coming from the state. In the Fall of 1984, 47 of these were American Indians, giving Dakota Wesleyan the fourth largest undergraduate American Indian enrollment of all United Methodist related colleges. It also represents the highest percentage of American Indian students in South Dakota schools, public or private. Speaking to the Board of Trustees in October, 1984, Dakota Wesleyan University President, Dr. James Beddow, reviewed the commitment to serve Native American students. He stated,"..the college's programs have steadily improved and currently Native Americans comprise 8 per cent of our student body. While many have special needs to be addressed, their presence and involvement has certainly enriched the Dakota Wesleyan experience."

Native Americans in the DWU Speech Communication Classroom

At the 1978 Speech Communication Association Convention Phillip Lujan and Dave Dukins presented a paper entitled "Communication Reticence: Native Americans in the College Classroom." From direct observation of 100 Cherokee students at the University of Oklanoma, these researchers identified several consistent behaviors which implied a functioning verbal conflict avoidance ethic. This included:

1. General non-participation in classroom discussion. This was accomplished through means such as self-imposed physical separation from other class members and avoidance of direct eye contact with teachers.
2. The avoidance or refusal to answer direct questions which call for value judgments or personal opinions.
3. The failure to ask questions in class.

Even better students were found to have a marked tendency to avoid both classroom discussion and advocating a point of view. While

this study was conducted at a large institution the experience at Dakota Wesleyan with primarily Sioux Indians has not been markedly different.

Two courses at Dakota Wesleyan are designed to meet general education oral communication requirements, Fundamentals of Speech Communication 101 and Interpersonal Communication 210. Most Indian students avoid Speech Communication 101 because it emphasizes public speaking. Most of those who do enroll struggle with speech apprehension, as manifested by missed assignments. There are a few excercions. This semester a coed, voted South Dakota's Outstanding Indian High School Student for 1983, has adjusted well to the 101 course. She believes that many Indian students have difficulty in speech communication classes because within their culture it is disrespectful to speak out in public. Another of my students is thirty-nine years old and returned to college to complete a degree in elementary education. She expressed this cultural bind in a paper written for the 101 course. "It took me a long time to adjust when I went to school. I had to learn different attitudes, values, and beliefs other than the ones I was taught at home." Both of these students have used their cultural backgrounds for presentations. Speaking from personal experience appeared to build their confidence and demonstrated their ability to succeed in a predominently white cultural institution.

The use of student listening reports in 101 has revealed another cultural difference, the organization of presentations. Approximately ten years ago, the late Chief Lame Deer, a respected Sioux Medicine

Man, came to our campus for Native American Awareness Days. Students in the 101 course had been told to include in their listening reports how the speaker developed his thesis and main points. When Chief Lame Deer stood up to speak he said, "Take what you want from what I say and leave behind what you don't want." He then presented a variety of ideas and experiences. The students' listening reports criticized this lack of central theme and supporting evidence. In retrospect, perhaps we just did not apply the proper cultural criteria.

The second course which meets general education oral communication requirements is Interpersonal Communication 210. This class does not involve public speaking and attracts most of the Indian students. Class enrollment has averaged 35-40 for the past two years. This size affected one Indian student when a role playing exercise required her to make oral comments in front of the entire class. She found the experience too threatening and was unable to respond. However, her test scores revealed an excellent understanding of principles and theories, and she earned a B+ in the course. Next year Interpersonal Communication will be divided into two sections of no more than 15-20 students. Hopefully this will provide a less threatening situation for both Indian and non-Indian students. In another case, a male student with physical disabilities and a low self concept was unable to speak within small discussion groups unless they consisted almost exclusively of Native Americans. His progress toward more effective communication was minimal and somewhat frustrating. Later in the year, this student approached me and asked what I thought of his declaring a history major. Although he remained apprehensive throughout the

course, this interaction demonstrated that he had made progress in interpersonal communication.

My experiences have led to several conclusions. Instructors must consider cultural differences and be sensitive to special needs. Nevertheless, Indian students enhance the experiences of all students in communication classes. Furthermore as instructors we can not be certain whether the Indian student will return to a career on the reservation or opt to work in the majority white culture. This makes their experiences in communication courses even more important. American Indian students and their instructors need to remember Chief Lame Deer's statement, "Take what you want from what I say and leave behind what you don't want."